

DONALD M. BAER REMEMBERED

FRANCES DEGEN HOROWITZ

THE GRADUATE CENTER
THE CITY UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK

I first encountered Don Baer in 1960 or 1961, when I was at Southern Oregon College and Don was in the Psychology Department at the University of Washington. We were both attending a meeting of the Western Psychological Association. I was presenting a paper—actually a report of the research I had done for my dissertation at the University of Iowa—on the reinforcement value of social stimuli for preschool children. Throughout the presentation there was Don, sitting in the front row, nodding his head, up and down, signaling his approval—a veritable reinforcement machine, that rhythmic nodding. We spoke afterwards and went each on our separate ways.

In the summer of 1961 my husband and I made a move to the University of Kansas where my husband had taken a position in the English Department and I became associated with the Bureau of Child Research. Within a few years, I found myself invited to describe to George Waggoner, the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Kansas, how I thought the Department of Home Economics might evolve into what would eventually become the Department of Human Development and Family Life. George Waggoner, along with Richard Schiefelbusch, the Director of the Bureau of Child Research, decided to support my proposal and, in those heady days of university expansions, each made available the necessary resources to bring about the transformation.

I had heard, via the grapevine, that the Psychology Department at the University of

Washington was not a happy place for Don and his students due to the intolerance for Skinnerian perspectives and the rejection of research using single-subject designs. When I contacted Don to see if I might interest him in an opportunity to shape a fledgling department, he agreed to come for a visit and explore a possible move to Lawrence.

I will never forget that visit and our discussions. We were of a mind—a department that would be behavioral in orientation, largely Skinnerian but not to exclude traditional developmental psychology. We agreed that the goal would not be to have a “zoo” in which there would be one of each theoretical kind. Rather, in addition to a strong core of Skinnerians, we would selectively recruit faculty whose work was characterized by behaviorally strong methodologies within traditional developmental psychology. I, John Wright, Hayne Reese, Howard Rosenfeld, and later Aletha Huston were to provide this ballast. In addition, we would retain some of the interdisciplinary traditions of Home Economics to include biological development as well as sociological and anthropological perspectives.

Don moved to Kansas, and within the next several years the department took shape; an undergraduate degree program was developed, a doctoral program, in developmental and child psychology, joint with the Psychology Department, was approved. The rest is, as they say, history. But that history would not have been written without the key recruitment of Don Baer. Don was a magnet for other faculty—initially Jim Sherman, Barbara Etzel, Mont Wolf, and Todd Risley. Don was also a magnet for students. He was a magnet around which compelling

The author was the Founding Chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Life at the University of Kansas from 1964 to 1975.

research ideas formed and grew and served as the basis for major federal funding. However, unlike many charismatic academic figures, Don never encouraged cult-like followers. He never used the power of his intellect to intimidate. He never pulled rank or position. And he never shirked the responsibilities—large or small—of the ordinary academic citizen.

Don Baer was cherished by those who worked with him because he was a superb colleague. He willingly lent his brilliant analytic mind in service to the most mundane, the most arcane, the most important, the most vexing of problems. He was a puzzler who loved the solving of puzzles, who loved to help work out the answers. And he was ever available to whomever sought his counsel and advice. And his counsel and advice were rarely didactic. Rather, it came in the form of questions—probes that moved the individual to increasingly greater clarity in successive approximations toward an answer or a perspective that would prove useful and satisfying.

In the inevitable arguments and tensions that arose from time to time in the business of the department, Don was always the coolest head. Those who might be spoiling for a fight were to be disappointed. I never saw Don take up the challenge of an encounter that was headed for emotional intensity. In this Don was an invaluable ally for a departmental chair whose responsibility it was to help move a group of strong-minded individuals toward consensus.

Many others can and will speak to Don's intellectual contributions, to his legacy in moving the science of behavior forward. Many others can describe those scientific contributions in terms of theoretical advances and in terms of knowledge that could be applied to improve lives. But only some of us, who had the privilege of working closely with him day in and day out, over a number of years, can give an account of Don Baer as the touchstone that he was, exemplifying what it was to be a truly responsible academic citizen and colleague.